My mother and I spent those five years in England as refugees. She in London, dodging bombs, coping with blackouts and leaden skies, keeping body and soul together, and making the difficult trip to the countryside every other Saturday to visit me, deposited for safety at the Lucy Gaster Children’s Home for displaced children.

Miss Gaster, the matron, remembered all of her children and corresponded with many. Years later, I visited her on the English coast with my husband. Still sharp. A very great lady. At my vivid recollections of the children’s home, she remarked simply, “surprisingly accurate”. Until she died I always received a birthday card from her.

One of my father’s favourite quotes was, “Memory is the only paradise out of which we cannot be expelled”. My remembrances are abundant and varied; many born of the agony of my family experience. Fortunately, I was spared “tell-all” explanations that a child has neither the years nor knowledge to digest; interpretations are no more our own memories than a drawing retouched by another belongs to the child that created it. Understanding came in time through my own awareness of the world around me. What a rich world that was! And how fortunate I was to have many of my earliest recollections confirmed.

The bright core of my memories: Kindness. Good faces, stern faces. Much mischief: rolling down the staircase of the farmhouse, a hat in the pigpen, toe-dirt picking in white iron beds. My best friend Hans, who shared my frequent “time outs”. Cardigans strewn with embroidered flowers. Making the rounds of the dining room, picking off meat left on plates. Squawking chickens. The rustle of cellophane that meant rare sweet treats. A burn on my hand administered by small boys in the schoolyard with a magnifying glass and sunlight, me watching in dumb fascination and soiled blue knickers with a pocket. Scarlet fever in Matron’s bed (“please face the wall when I undress”, she asked, an offer I had to accept – curiosity temporarily squelched). A man in a field being carried to a stretcher. Sunshine, trees and flowers in a radiant garden. A song and a poem (try me!) Underground air-raid shelters and magical stories read by Nurse Mander from black squiggles on a page. I read before I can remember the beginning – perhaps learned at Infants’ School, where my first report card says “Ruth is fond of singing”?

1943. A silent grim wait in foggy London and finally the train to Liverpool to board the object of secrecy, the Mauretania, ocean liner and sometime troop transport of the Cunard White Star Line. We travelled in a convoy to better avoid attack by German U-boats. It took nine crowded seasick days to cross the ocean.

By Ruth Eva Heuberger

Extract from a piece that previously appeared in “The Berkshire Review”, Pittsfield Mass (1999) and The Women’s Times, Great Barrington Mass (1998)

<http://www.hias.org/files/u1/120stories/120stories_complete.pdf>